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Reflection/Commentary on a Past Article: “Duration, Dominance, and Depth in Telephone and Face-to-Face Interviews: A Comparative Exploration”

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Annie Louise Irvine¹ 

Traditionally, methodological textbooks have advised that the telephone mode is not well suited to the task of qualitative interviewing. At the same time, there are well-rehearsed arguments as to why telephone interviews may be a useful option in some circumstances. Despite this debate, there remains very limited systematic empirical exploration of differences in the process and outcomes of qualitative telephone versus face-to-face interviews. Based on a recent “mode comparison” study that sought to contribute to this gap in methodological knowledge, analysis of the overall duration, dominance, and depth of talk between researcher and participant in a small set of telephone and face-to-face interviews revealed the following findings. (i) Despite much variation in individual interview length, telephone interviews were typically, and on average, shorter than those conducted face-to-face. (ii) The shorter duration of telephone interviews was a result of the participant speaking for less time, rather than a proportional reduction in talk from both parties. Additionally, in telephone interviews, participants generally held the floor for shorter stretches at a time. (iii) The researcher did slightly more talking during telephone interviews than in face-to-face interactions. Combined with the reduced amount of participant talk, this meant that the researcher tended to hold the floor for a greater proportion of time in telephone interviews. (iv) To a moderate degree, the shorter length of telephone interviews could be accounted for by a reduction in coverage of themes. However, the principal explanation appeared to lie in a tendency for telephone interview participants to provide relatively less detail or elaboration. In this article, we consider why these differences may occur, if and how they might matter to the research, and how we might wish to modify interview practices in response.

How Did It Fit Into Your Career Path?

This article originated from my first independent research grant and was one of my first sole-authored peer-reviewed publications. It went on to be a key piece within my portfolio when I submitted for the award of PhD by Publication in 2015.¹

I therefore consider it one of the more significant pieces of writing in my research career to date.

How Did It Impact Your Work?

The methodological project from which the paper originated applied techniques of conversation analysis to the exploratory comparison of face-to-face and telephone interviews in qualitative social research. This was quite groundbreaking at the time and provided me with exciting opportunities to present at national and international conferences, to give seminars, and to write chapters and guides for students and applied social researchers, as well as the study’s more academic outputs.

How Did It Impact the Field?

The paper has been quite widely cited (as evidenced by its inclusion in this special issue), and I also received a number of direct enquiries from students and researchers in relation to the topic area. Along with a companion paper that elaborated on additional findings of the project, this article has been cited in methodological textbooks as well as other scholarly articles across a range of disciplines. However, although there has continued to be a small stream of methodological studies addressing the use of telephone versus face-to-face interviews in qualitative research, my sense is that the more technologically advanced modes of online interviewing, both text-based and video-enabled, are receiving relatively more attention among contemporary scholars.

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Were There Any Surprises That Came From This Publication?

I have been quite struck by the wide variety of topic areas against which the paper has been cited, ranging from health sciences to management to leisure studies to law. I suppose this reflects the cross-cutting relevance of qualitative interview methods to social sciences across the board. I have also noticed the ease with which one's work can be "mis-cited" (i.e. your findings taken out of context and represented in a way that does not fit your original line of argument) and that different scholars have been able to use the study's findings to support an argument either for *or* against the use of a particular mode!

What Is the One Thing That You Think Has Changed the Most in This Area Since You Published This Manuscript?


Since the study was conducted, there has been an ongoing rise in the dominance of mobile telephone use. Something that continues to interest me is the influence of the mobile telephone on how in-depth social research interviews are or can

be conducted, including the influence of mobile culture on the nature of the research "appointment" and how it is reshaping the interview setting.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. *PhD by Publication* is an alternative route to the traditional thesis, whereby the candidate submits a portfolio of published work alongside a shorter "integrative chapter" that describes the impact and contribution of their published work over a period of time. I came into my research career with just a graduate degree, completed a master's via part-time distance learning while in a research post, and was later awarded a PhD based on publications completed over an 8-year period.